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## CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL INSTRUCTION BY NON-ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

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A recent issue of a popular magazine contains the advertisements of thirty schools offering instruction by correspondence. The courses cover nearly every known human activity ranging from raising poultry to training engineers. They include instruction in accounting, law, electrical engineering, meter engineering, signal engineering, wireless operating, automobile driving and repairing, lettering and designing, drawing and cartooning, drafting, advertising and selling, public-speaking, watch repairing, executive management, English and even ventriloquism. A person may be made into a traffic inspector, a detective or a musician—all by mail.

### EXTENT OF INFLUENCE

The best measure of the influence of these schools is the number of students enrolled and the amount of money spent in preparing the courses of instruction as well as in advertising them. One school offering four main courses—accounting, law, traffic management and business administration—has enrolled 90,000 students. A correspondence law school has put 40,000 enrollments upon its records within the last five years, while another school offering a general business course for executives has enrolled over 40,000 within approximately the same time. Even those schools which appeal to the narrower fields of highly specialized activities such as music, credits and collections and so on, show a wide influence. Over 260,000 persons have received instruction from one school teaching music by mail since its establishment twenty years ago, while the active list that follows the weekly lessons never falls below 10,000 students.

In the same length of time, a school of design and lettering has enrolled 9,455 students, and a correspondence collection school has enrolled 7,236 in about ten years. Even a highly specialized field, that of investments, has enabled one school to keep up an average

yearly enrollment of 120. A school offering general preparatory training in college and commercial subjects has a yearly enrollment which would do credit in point of size to the entering class of the average college. That the sphere of influence is not limited to any particular class of students is shown by the records of the two most prominent schools. The well known International Correspondence Schools, which make an appeal largely to students of apprentice grade, had enrolled a grand total of 1,750,441 up to June 1, 1915. In one year alone, there were as many as 125,000 new enrollments.

In some respects, however, the growth of the Alexander Hamilton Institute is still more significant in showing the range of influence which these schools are exercising. This institution, only a little more than five years old, has developed an entirely new field of correspondence instruction in its course and service for business executives. Within five years it has enrolled over 40,000 men whose average age is 32 years and whose average income is over \$2,700 a year.

#### INFLUENCE OF ADVERTISING AND SALESMANSHIP

One thing stands out preëminently in favor of the reputable correspondence school—the aggressive methods of pushing the cause of education as contrasted with the passive course of academic institutions. The former does not depend upon inherited, ancestral connections or “dignity” for its reputation, nor does it expect to win students solely by the advertising route of “our loving friends.” The best correspondence schools use aggressive, business-like methods, and with the exception of a few important particulars they are straightforward in their advertising, and their salesmen are clean cut, intelligent men who would look upon an instructorship in a college as offering fewer opportunities for service than their contact outside with men of the world.

Added to sincerity of purpose and high ideals is the influence which goes with the extensive advertising and continuous efforts of thousands of sales agents. A few years ago the International Schools were spending \$2,000,000 annually in creating a demand for education. The total advertising appropriations today of the larger correspondence schools run between four and five million dollars per annum. Furthermore, if we take into consideration the selling expenses of one of these schools as well as the advertising appro-

priation, the influence is increased still more. For instance, one New York institution pays its salesmen an amount that closely approaches the total money income of the largest school of commerce in the world.

Contrast the influence of a university advertisement, which in one inch of space announces that it offers courses in certain academic subjects from September 15 to June 1, with that of a correspondence school which makes a full page display in the *Saturday Evening Post*, announcing "Muscles at twenty; brains at forty!" followed by testimonials of well known men, a list of subjects and a straightforward selling talk backed up with the names of the men behind the institution. Such an advertisement cost thousands of dollars to prepare and to distribute while the university announcement was prepared by a clerk in the registrar's office. Thousands read and answered the correspondence school advertisement and they were followed up, first by expensive, carefully prepared literature urging the claims of education, and secondly, by a visit from a personal representative of the school. The university announcement inspired a few dozen to write for a catalogue, and thanks to a predisposition engendered by twelve years or more of preparatory school work and the daily reading of the sporting page of the newspapers, a few of these were induced to go to college.

Although one school sends out over 30,000,000 pieces of printed matter per year, the influence produced by printer's ink is small compared to that exerted by the body of sales agents in the field. High grade correspondence schools are as careful in selecting their sales force as colleges and high schools are in choosing their faculties. The standards may be somewhat different but those of the former are in no way inferior to the latter. The salesmen's influence is twofold. They not only spread a knowledge of certain subjects of study but they inspire thousands of men and women to undertake educational work. For instance, one school employs one hundred salesmen of whom the most are college trained and these are frequently welcomed in the offices of business men because of their wide grasp of the subjects that they are selling. Such salesmen present on an average five selling talks a day. This means that a total of about 150,000 prospects have one branch of education forced upon their attention every year by men who are able to convince them that education is worth while. By taking advantage of the prospect's

moment of strength and inspiration to train himself further, the salesman ties him by contract to a prescribed course of study for a period of a year or more.

Such is the influence and power for good where proper ideals and standards are lived up to. If all the money and sales energy were spent to develop a healthy discontent and to arouse a wholesome ambition there would be little criticism of correspondence school methods. But it is feared that much money and energy are expended only to arouse futile hopes and to inspire efforts doomed to end in disappointment.

### VARIETIES OF CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

Classified according to the nature of instruction offered, correspondence schools fall into three groups:

1. Schools offering general training in fundamental subjects such as the Home Correspondence School;
2. Schools offering specialized technical training, such as the Blackstone Institute for law, Pace and Pace for accounting and the American Collection Service;
3. Schools offering general commercial training, such as the Alexander Hamilton Institute, the American School of Correspondence and the LaSalle Institute.

It is not necessary to describe these classes further than indicated by reference to the few named above which illustrate each type.

Perhaps a more significant classification is one based on the character of the ownership and control. Here again we find three types as follows:

1. Public correspondence schools—those connected with universities (Wisconsin, Minnesota, Chicago);
2. Private—such as described above;
3. Quasi-public—such as the National Commercial Gas Association and the American Institute of Banking.

From a social and economic point of view the quasi-public corporation school is charged perhaps with greater possibilities than either or both of the others. Transportation systems, telephone and telegraph systems, insurance societies, public service corporations, such as gas and electric companies, are all showing tendencies toward a standardization of their courses of instruction whereby the whole industry may be benefited from the coöperative effort as well as from the effects of integration of sentiment and policy which common effort, following uniform instructions, always

induces. If space permitted, a study of the progress which the gas companies have made in correspondence courses conducted by the National Commercial Gas Association would be very instructive. Starting with a preliminary course which is devoted to the fundamentals of mathematics, science and English, but tied up with practical problems of the manufacture and distribution of gas and electricity, the course divides into five main branches corresponding to the chief commercial activities of gas companies. These are treated from the salesman's point of view and each covers a period of two years. The subjects are: (1) industrial power and fuel; (2) illumination; (3) salesmanship (general for the non-technical man); (4) commercial management; (5) accounting and office practice.

Over 8,000 men have enrolled in the various courses of this association during the past five years. The percentage of men completing a full course is unusually high—over 50 per cent. No attempt is made to secure profits; the sum charged for the courses is barely enough to cover the cost of production, distribution and service connected with the textbooks and the marking and criticizing of the papers which are sent into the central office from all over the United States and Canada.

#### WORK OF CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

This falls into two divisions: (1) the tests or lessons which are supplemented in some cases by special lectures, "talks" and problems; and (2) the criticism or help given the student on his answers to problems, questions and quizzes. The most recent development, however, is the addition of a service or "encouragement" department. This is devoted to keeping the student interested in his work and encouraging those who have begun to lose enthusiasm or have met difficulties which ordinary criticism cannot remove.

The text and lesson material varies from school to school. The larger and more prominent ones put out texts of real educational merit. They differ from the regular school or college texts in that the diction is extremely simple, explanations are very elaborate and truisms are never omitted. The subjects are closely related to the realities of practical life and are kept up-to-date. For these reasons correspondence school texts are also popular with many prominent colleges and universities. Fifty-three American universities are

using one or more of the texts of a school giving general commercial instruction. At least six prominent colleges use the texts of a correspondence course in accounting, and over 400 trade schools and colleges use the books of the International Schools.

Keeping the courses and service up-to-date is a leading characteristic of private correspondence schools as a whole. One company spent over \$1,700,000 to bring their courses up to their present standard. Another company has revised its volumes and all its supplementary material six times in the five years of its existence at a cost varying from \$10,000 to \$30,000 each time.

### THE SERVICE

It is more difficult to value the service of criticizing the student and keeping him enthusiastic, yet it is just this which differentiates a correspondence school from a mere book-selling concern. It is possible to put out good texts and yet have the educational results dependent on the service severely criticized. The chief complaints may be summed up as follows: (1) the work of marking papers is put into the hands of incompetent men; (2) explanations are not complete nor clear; (3) delays and neglect in returning answers destroy interest.

Here then are some of the pedagogical difficulties which confront correspondence schools. In order that the student may get a real training from the criticisms of his work, he must absorb from them, unconsciously perhaps, the knowledge or intuition of the proper approach to the solution of a problem; he must acquire a feeling for the use of analytical methods and a power to sense the strategical point of attack in the problems presented to him. To give this power to the student the critic himself must first possess the power. Such critics are rare and their services are well paid. Combined with this obstacle is the fact that the management of most correspondence schools is in the hands of men who are more concerned with selling the product than with the quality of the goods or the service. Since business does not depend much on the "return orders," there is great temptation for these men to push for new prospects and neglect the service which ties old customers to a firm. This tendency should be looked upon with great disfavor. There is hope, however, for the future, in the sense of saving or regaining the confidence of the public. One school shows a steady increase

in service expenditure over all the others. The department is made up almost entirely of college graduates who have had practical experience in the line of work that they attempt to criticize.

Poor service undoubtedly accounts for the small number of students who complete the courses. The problem is difficult for it must consider all sorts of men—the mature, those who never have acquired the knack or have lost it, “motor-minded” men to whom reflection is obnoxious, men who do not understand the hard grind necessary to acquire an education, men “who would like to swallow a pill and wake up to find that they were full of all the knowledge necessary to make a fortune,” as one school executive puts it.

#### COMMERCIAL CHARACTER OF CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS IN RELATION TO EDUCATIONAL VALUE

Can an institution which is in the field for profit be relied upon to give proper attention to those phases of education which do not yield a profit in dollars and cents? It is difficult for most educators to see how money profits and a student's interests can be cared for at the same time. They fail to see that commercial and business relations are controlled by principles which protect the essential qualities of an educational product in the same manner that the goods of a manufacturer are kept up to standard.

Good business policy demands that the interests of the consumer stand first. In the case of the correspondence schools a violation of this principle has brought about more than one recent failure just as it did in the case of many large merchandizing establishments of recent memory. It is not a question of inherent differences between the commercial and educational elements in the composition of a correspondence school, but the universal problem which faces every enterprise—the problem of deciding between the long run and the short run policies of a business.

There is plenty of internal evidence both in the material of instruction and in the organization of the better schools to prove that the commercial character of the work does not necessarily interfere with a broad and liberal treatment of the subjects. It is true that the possibility of money-making attracts into the field some men with narrow vision and hence a narrow utilitarian view of the educational elements in his product.

However, one phase of correspondence school activities shows



a tardy development. This is an element which creeps into the advertising of even the best schools. An examination of the advertisements and circular letters reveals many objectionable features. They bristle with special scholarships, reduced prices for limited periods, free offers and the like. It is not that the schools play up their best and strongest features but the fact that they use the quack's methods of appealing to men's weaknesses rather than to their strength and that their innumerable special offers of scholarships, reduced prices, etc., are as a matter of fact practically perpetual in one form or another. "Let me congratulate you," writes one school in answer to my inquiry. "You have written us *just in time* to get our special reduced price offer." It appears that the author was particularly fortunate in selecting the time he did for this investigation for in nine cases out of ten, the school was always, for the time being, either making a special reduced rate or offering a limited number of scholarships. Underlying the special offers is always the bargain lure and while it is not a dignified thing to reduce any staple product to a bargain basis, the greatest injury comes from that destruction of confidence of the people in what the correspondence schools have to say for themselves.

A correspondence school need not be tied to an academic institution in order to be endowed with high ideals, pure motives and professional methods, but there is still a strong prejudice against these institutions which is based on the practices of the weak and fraudulent schools which deliberately cater to the delusions of the simple-minded and by misleading advertisements exploit the gullible public. However, this is not the only field where business men have been led astray by the lights of false advertising. The revolt against it is growing stronger every day. Correspondence schools like the common public schools will grow in number and influence as the demand, not only for popular education increases, but also for a continuous education which lasts far beyond the "school days" of the active man whether he be mechanic, professional or business man.